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**Fisheries Service Issues Draft Environmental Assessment
on Makah Gray Whale Hunt, Sets Public Hearing**

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service has issued a draft environmental assessment that looks at the environmental effects of a gray whale hunt off the Washington coast. It also lays out a range of alternatives under which the Makah Indian tribe might continue its gray whale hunt for the next two years. The draft is a result of a federal appeals court decision last year that set aside an earlier environmental assessment. Under the National Environmental Policy Act, federal agencies are required to analyze their actions with respect to the environment.

The draft examines the biology, abundance, and distribution of the gray whale, and the affects of human activities on the population. The draft also outlines a range of subsistence hunting alternatives under which the Makah could exercise their whale-hunting treaty rights. The Makah is the only U.S. Indian tribe that has a specific treaty right to take whales.

Under the first alternative, NOAA would grant the Makah tribe a quota of up to five whales a year in keeping with the quota set by the International Whaling Commission in 1997. This alternative is similar to the arrangement NOAA had with the Makahs during the tribal hunts in 1999 and 2000 in which the tribe targeted migrating whales off the Washington coast during the animals' annual journeys between Alaska and Mexico.

Under alternative two, the quota would remain at five whales a year, but the tribe would not be restricted to hunting only during the migration period. There would be a limited hunt outside the migration period.

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The third alternative would essentially place no restrictions on where and when the tribe could hunt, only limiting the tribe to take no more than five whales a year.

The fourth and final alternative would not allow a whaling quota for the tribe.

As is typical with draft environmental assessments, this range of alternatives covers all likely options. There is no "preferred alternative" in this draft since its purpose is in part to solicit public comments in preparation for a final document, expected sometime in March.

To facilitate comments on this draft, NOAA Fisheries said it will hold a public hearing to gather comments on the draft on Feb. 1 at 6:00 p.m, the Sand Point Magnuson Park Auditorium, 74th Street Entrance, 7400 Sand Point Way, N.E. (the former Naval airbase), Seattle, Wash. Copies of the draft can be obtained by visiting <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov>, or by writing Gale Heim, Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries, 1315 East-West highway, Silver spring, Md. 20910. Comments on the draft can be sent to the same address by Feb. 16.

The Makah tribe, which has a whaling tradition that dates back at least 1500 years, resumed its whale hunting in 1998 following removal of the gray whale from the Endangered Species List and establishment of a subsistence quota from the International Whaling Commission. This quota established by the commission is for aboriginal subsistence whaling only. No commercial trade of any whale or whale products would be allowed. The tribe, which had not engaged in whaling since the 1920s, took a single whale in 1999. Biologists estimate there are more than 26,000 gray whales in existence today, likely the biggest population since beginning of commercial exploitation of the gray whale in the 1840s. The gray whale recovered to such a point that it was taken off the U.S. list of Endangered Species in 1994.